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ABSTRACT

The decline in writing ability among students entering college can be attributed to such factors as the absence of verbal precision in television, advertising, and political language, the lack of writing practice in high school English classes, overloaded and unprepared English teachers, and the difficulties involved in evaluating student writing. In response to this problem, the Educational Testing Services (ETS) offers educators a holistic approach to scoring the essay portions of standardized tests. This scoring method, based on the belief that the overall impression in a written passage is more important than any other single grammatical aspect, requires that each essay be evaluated on a simple scale by two or three readers, making it possible for major college-level testing programs to reintroduce a writing sample. Other services offered by ETS include teaching educators to use holistic scoring, devising test exercises to assess the writing abilities of French and English speaking students in Canada, constructing multiple choice writing assessments, preparing high school and college-level skills tests, and forming a writing center that responds to the requests for assistance that fall out of the range of existing ETS programs. (MAI)

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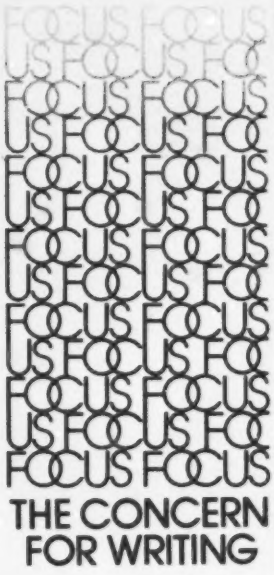

THE CONCERN FOR WRITING

ED159674

FOCUS 5 • 1978 • Educational Testing Service

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EDITOR'S NOTE:
Each issue in the *FOCUS* series of occasional papers discusses a critical aspect of education today and the work Educational Testing Service is doing to help cope with it. Most widely known for standardized tests, ETS is also the nation's largest nonprofit educational research organization. Its 2,000 staffers apply the tools of the social sciences to the problems of minority students, school finance, access to higher education, human development, occupational certification, and a host of other areas that demand attention. *FOCUS* 5 describes efforts to improve students'—and others'—command of an ability that is among the most difficult to master yet essential to a highly complex society—writing.

—Arthur Bishop

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SIGNS OF CRISIS

Over the past several decades, James Thurber, E. B. White, and a number of other literary craftsmen periodically decried in print the declining command of the English language shown by supposedly educated Americans. Many dismissed them as impractical pedants trying to impose esoteric standards on people who neither understood nor cared about nor needed such highly developed verbal abilities. But the detractors missed the point. If people did not make the effort to learn to express themselves precisely on paper, there would be fewer good models to emulate, and the general level of language usage would decline. There is now a steadily growing body of evidence that the bleak future the concerned stylists foresaw is coming about:

- Verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test have declined 49 points (on a 600-point scale) between 1963 and 1977. Although these scores say nothing directly about writing ability, they do reflect students' facility with the language, which is fundamental to writing.
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress has reported that 17-year-olds' command of the mechanics of writing declined between 1970 and 1974, and that only

half of them could organize their ideas on paper. They showed a marked tendency to write incoherent paragraphs composed of random sentences with simple vocabularies. Asked to revise what they had written, most students confined themselves to correcting mechanical errors and neglected to revise faulty organization or improve transitions between ideas.

- A survey of college faculty members conducted by Everett Carll Ladd Jr. and Seymour Martin Lipset in 1977 for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found a virtual consensus that most students are "seriously underprepared" in the basic skills of written and oral communication.
- A pamphlet prepared by the Association of American Publishers to help college freshmen get the most out of their textbooks had to be rewritten on a ninth-grade reading level so students could understand it.
- The Council for Basic Education has formed a commission, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and chaired by Clifton Fadiman, to investigate the writing crisis. Jacques Barzun, historian and vociferous advocate of liberal education, is a consultant to the commission. A book-length report is expected before the end of 1978.
- At the University of California at Berkeley, where students come from the top eighth of California high school graduates, nearly half the freshmen in recent years have been so deficient in writing ability that they needed a remedial course they themselves call "bonehead English."
- City College of New York (CCNY) has its problems, too. Once proudly hailed as the "proletarian Harvard" because of its high academic standards and free tuition for city residents, CCNY began open admissions in 1970 along with the other colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY). Although most of CCNY's freshmen had at least an 80 high school average, a third of the open-admissions freshmen lacked even basic literacy, and only one third was ready for college-level English. In

all, nearly 90 percent of CCNY's students took some form of remedial writing instruction.

More recently CUNY mandated that, starting in September 1978, students must write an acceptable essay of 200 to 300 words and pass tests on a twelfth-grade level in reading and a ninth-grade level in math before becoming juniors.

- Harvard is also considering more emphasis on writing. In May 1978, the faculty of arts and sciences accepted a sweeping reform that would replace the general education program in effect since 1945 with a core curriculum

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covering five areas of knowledge (literature and the arts, history, social and philosophical analysis, science and mathematics, and foreign languages and cultures) plus courses in expository writing.

Harvard freshmen will take a writing course in conjunction with one of the five core courses. They will write papers in the substantive course, and the papers will be graded by both the course instructor and a writing teacher.

- Yale, Cornell, Brown, Stanford, the University of Colorado, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Illinois, Keene State College in New Hampshire, Simmons College, and countless other institutions have introduced some form of basic writing instruction in the past few years. Many have, in fact, reinstated courses they dropped in recent decades. These actions have reversed a trend that saw the proportion of colleges requiring freshman English drop from 90 percent in 1967 to 72 percent in 1974—and not all those freshman courses were in composition.

THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Perhaps one underlying cause of the decline in writing ability is the pervasive attitude that the written word is not as important as it once was. Most general-interest magazines ceased publishing as people turned to television for entertainment and news.

Television debases the language as it strives to reach as wide an audience as possible through images and simple language. With inflection, gesture, and expression all helping to convey meaning, verbal precision is less important than it is in writing, and standards, consequently, slip.

The language of politics is often intended to obfuscate while seeming to enlighten. Advertising relies on emotional appeal to short-circuit rational thought. Many a self-serving profession uses jargon to exaggerate its claims to special knowledge.

Some of the murky, misleading language one reads or hears every day is intended to be that way. But not all of it is. Much of it is simply inept.

Lack of Practice

The nub of the matter is that writing is a complex skill mastered only through lengthy, arduous effort. It is a participatory endeavor, not a spectator sport. And most high school students do not get enough practice to become competent writers.

Since the 1960s, schools have put less emphasis on composition and more on such activities as film criticism, journalism, theater, and what have you before students have acquired the fundamentals of written language.

Even composition courses tend to emphasize "creative expression" and all too often consign grammar and other aspects of mechanics—the tools of the writer's trade—to limbo as an impediment to creativity. Writing in an uninhibited free-form' way heedless of conventional grammar and usage can be extremely satisfying. Such self-gratification may be good therapy, but it is rarely effective

communication because idiosyncratic mechanics and syntax draw attention to themselves and away from the writer's meaning.

Standard English

Eliminating static to allow the message to come through is the fundamental purpose of Standard English. Not merely a "prestige dialect," it is a highly practical set of conventions about the use of language that most educated people

> **[Writing] is a participatory endeavor, not a spectator sport.**

share. When it is used, readers are able to concentrate on the ideas behind the words and not stumble over extraneous quirks in language. Standard English facilitates communication among people conversant with it.

Writers may use any dialect they wish, of course, but they will succeed in communicating only with those who understand the dialect. To communicate with a wider audience, a writer must be able to handle Standard English, the dialect common to educated people in this nation.

Good, experienced writers (and not all experienced writers are good, as so many professional journals attest) have acquired such a firm grasp of grammar, rhetoric, and logic that they usually write almost automatically in a way others can understand readily. They can do so because they have trained themselves to think clearly, using the conventions of Standard English.

And there's the rub. One cannot write clearly unless one can think clearly. Thinking and writing clearly are difficult tasks—so difficult, in fact, that they are two of the primary open-ended goals of liberal arts education.

The nation's colleges are now telling the nation's high schools that they want students who can express themselves more clearly on paper. If high schools are to help stu-

dents learn to write, they must help English teachers, who are overloaded and underprepared to teach writing.

Overloaded Teachers

Schools must find ways to permit teachers to give students enough writing practice. For a composition course to be effective, students must write frequently, their papers must be corrected carefully, and their mechanical errors, scrambled organization, and stylistic gaffes must be explained so they can rectify them.

Present teaching loads prohibit such careful, time-consuming procedures. A typical English teacher has five classes of 25 or 30 students each. A teacher with 150 students who spends 10 minutes going over each paper would spend 25 hours on each assignment on top of lesson planning and other duties. A teacher, no matter how conscientious, simply does not have the time to give students the amount of practice they need. But cutting composition classes to a manageable size is an expense most districts cannot or will not countenance.

The Lay Reader Program

One way around the problem of class size is a program developed by ETS staff members over 20 years ago. Rather than being burdened with the job of correcting all the students' papers, the teacher works with a part-time "lay reader" who has been trained to grade compositions. ETS

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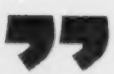

developed methods and materials for selecting, training, and working with qualified people (usually college graduates who were not pursuing full-time careers).

The essentials of the plan are that lay readers correct and grade students' papers, confer with students about

their work, and give the teacher the grades and comments about the students' performance. Some teachers quickly read every paper themselves; others read only a portion of them. Freed of a time-consuming chore, teachers can give more writing assignments without slighting other aspects of their courses. Many schools used lay readers until the partial eclipse of writing instruction in the 1960s.

Unprepared Teachers

The second major obstacle to effective writing programs is that many English teachers are ill-equipped to teach writing and feel uncomfortable doing so. Many programs that prepare English teachers concentrate heavily on literature and give short shrift to writing. There is even less emphasis on the teaching of writing, a skill that—like writing itself—can be learned only through practice.

"Many programs that prepare English teachers concentrate heavily on literature and give short shrift to writing."

One way to help teachers become more proficient in teaching students to write is a series of workshops, like the Bay Area Writing Project, developed by the University of California at Berkeley five years ago. Composition teachers from schools and colleges attend intensive summer clinics and further sessions held throughout the school year. Working with writing specialists, teachers study writing problems, discuss remedies, and spend a lot of time writing. Back at their own schools, they train other teachers.

Expanded into the California Writing Project, the program is now being used at eight other California colleges and universities, and adaptations are in operation at Duke, Rutgers, Portland State (Oregon), and a growing number of other colleges. Some of these writing centers are getting in-

itial financing from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which is also funding a number of other writing projects across the nation.

EVALUATING WRITING ABILITIES

One of the more troublesome aspects of any program designed to improve writing abilities is evaluating those abilities. By its very nature, writing defies precise evaluation.

Objective vs. Subjective Assessment

Multiple-choice, short-answer, and similar forms of "objective" tests are relatively simple to score, and they yield good assessments of mechanical aspects of writing such as word usage, grammar, and spelling. More sophisticated forms developed in recent years deal with logical relationships, categorizing, inferences, diction, and other relatively complex skills. To do well on these kinds of questions, a person must have a fairly well-developed verbal facility.

But many believe the best way to measure such essentials as organizing ability, clarity of expression, and other more intricate and subtle factors is to have students write. Evaluating writing samples is not, however, an exact process since it depends heavily on human judgments. Because of a general lack of confidence in subjective evaluations in this objective age, and because of the length of time it takes to score writing samples, essays have not been used much in large-scale testing programs in recent years.

Scoring Problem Eliminates Essay Tests

The College Board and ETS tried one way around the essay-scoring problem in the early 1960s when, in response to requests from colleges concerned about the low writing ability of their applicants, they introduced an optional writing sample into the Admissions Testing Program. ETS did not score the samples but sent copies to colleges where, presumably, English faculty members evaluated them. The

College Board discontinued the writing sample in 1967 after an ETS study found that few colleges—including some that had reqeusted it—had much enthusiasm for it or did anything with it.

During the 1950s and '60s, many research scientists investigated the value of essay tests. Some studies were quite elaborate. One involved over 600 high school students who wrote five essays, took six objective tests, and did two other exercises. Each essay was evaluated by 25 readers and two of them by another 145 readers.

All these studies reached much the same conclusion: Writing samples made slight contributions to the predictive accuracy of objective tests. The question then became: "Is the increased accuracy worth the increased cost of scoring?" The answer was most frequently "no."

Yet the value of essay scores is still irrefutable. If a way could be found to cut the cost of scoring. . . .

ONE SOLUTION TO THE SCORING PROBLEM

ETS test-development specialists did just that in the 1960s. Called "holistic scoring," the method is based on the belief that the overall impression that a written passage makes is more important than spelling, punctuation, organization, or any other single aspect. A scorer reads the paper quickly and assigns it a score (usually on a scale of 1 to 3 or of 1 to

"Writing samples made slight contributions to the predictive accuracy of objective tests."

4). Two or three people score every paper and the sum of their scores becomes the paper's final score.

Before a typical scoring session begins, ETS staff members explain the holistic method. The teachers who will do the scoring under the direction of one of their number, who is the "master reader," discuss what to look for in evaluat-

ing the papers. They also score dozens of samples and reach a consensus on which ones merit particular scores so that everyone uses similar standards.

Advantages of Holistic Scoring

Holistic scoring is thus a relatively quick, inexpensive way of getting a general impression of a student's writing ability. It cannot be used exclusively in the classroom, however, because students need the results of careful analytical grading of their papers to learn how to improve their writing. But teachers can use the method for some papers and thus have time to give more writing assignments.

When used by teachers in a school or district, the holistic method has advantages other than speed. It induces teachers to think about writing and to share their views about standards and other aspects of the craft. Thus it helps clarify and unify teachers' ideas of what they expect and can expect from students. The method itself also concentrates teachers' attention on what students do well rather than on their mistakes.

These clear-cut advantages have attracted the attention of many educators. In the past few years, ETS staff members have given workshops in holistic scoring to teachers in many states. And inquiries about the method have come from nations throughout the world.

Grading 85,000 Essays in a Week

The holistic method made it possible to reintroduce a writing sample into the English Composition Achievement Test, part of the College Board's Admissions Testing Program, after a six-year lapse. Each of 85,000 students wrote a 20-

Holistic scoring is thus a relatively quick, inexpensive way of getting a general impression of a student's writing ability.

minute essay (in addition to completing a 40-minute multiple-choice section) in December 1977, and about a week later over 225 high school and college English teachers from 48 states met in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to score the papers. After a brief workshop on holistic scoring, they spent five days reading and scoring papers.

Each paper was read by three people, making a total of 255,000 readings in 6,000 reader-hours—or about 70 seconds per essay reading. It took about 3½ minutes to grade each essay.

Essays Assess College-Level Writing

The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), a series of tests that many colleges use to grant students credit for learning they acquired elsewhere, is also taking advantage of the speed of holistic scoring. Starting in June 1978, CLEP is offering two versions of a new 90-minute English Composition exam. One version has a 45-minute multiple-choice section and a 45-minute essay to be centrally graded by college English teachers following the June and October test dates on which the essay is offered. The other version has two 45-minute objective sections and is given at each monthly CLEP testing session beginning in October 1978.

College faculty members and ETS test developers wrote the new exam's questions, which were pretested on groups of college students. The first objective section—common to both versions—deals primarily with the sentence: structure, phrasing, clarity. The second objective section covers larger elements of writing: logic, the use of supporting detail, and adapting language to particular purposes and audiences. The questions involve sequence of ideas, transitions, coherence, specificity of examples, and appropriateness of evidence and word choice.

Training Teachers to Score Holistically

ETS staff members have also trained local teachers to use holistic scoring to evaluate their own students. In the fall of

1976, the Gary, Indiana, schools wanted to assess their students' writing abilities. That fall, 8,000 ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders wrote compositions. ETS taught about 60 teachers to use the holistic method, and in an all-day session, each teacher read between 200 and 300 papers. Every

. . . in an all-day session, each teacher read between 200 and 300 papers.

paper was read and evaluated twice, and failing papers were given an additional analytical reading to identify the students' difficulties.

Assessing Writing in English and French

The Department of Education of the province of New Brunswick, Canada, has used the holistic method to assess the writing ability of students throughout the province and, at the same time, to give teachers an idea of how well their own students can write.

In 1977, New Brunswick administrators asked ETS to help them assess the writing abilities of fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders, 65 percent of whom speak English and 35 percent French. ETS consultants trained teachers to devise test exercises that would measure students' grasp of various types of writing. Six committees of teachers (representing the three grade levels and two languages) then wrote exercises to elicit particular kinds of writing. From these exercises, 50 in English and 50 in French were pretested on 3,000 students who spoke each language. Teachers trained by ETS scored the exercises holistically and eliminated ineffective ones (too hard, too easy, ambiguous).

Teachers throughout the province gave the final tests in their classrooms and, working with a scoring manual developed jointly by the Department of Education and ETS, met in groups to score them. Thus the teachers immediately learned how well their own students could write.

Teacher-readers from the entire province met in November to score the exercises of a random sample of 6,000 students to draw provincewide profiles of writing abilities at the three levels in the two languages.

COLLEGE PLACEMENT TESTS

When the California State University and College system wanted to improve its method of placing freshmen in English courses, officials asked ETS for help. Working with English faculty members from CSUC's 19 institutions, ETS specialists developed a 2½-hour test combining three multiple-choice sections (reading, sentence construction, and logic and organization) plus a 45-minute essay section. First offered in August 1977, the test was taken by 30,000 students in 1977-78. The essays are graded holistically by CSUC English faculty members after each test date.

Multiple-Choice Testing

Although holistic scoring has made it possible for essay tests to re-emerge on a large scale, multiple-choice assessments are still the least expensive and most frequently used form of large-scale testing.

In 1974, responding to requests from the nation's colleges, ETS and the College Board introduced an experimental test, the Test of Standard Written English, into the Admissions Testing Program along with the SAT. A 30-minute multiple-choice test that assesses a student's grasp of the conventions of Standard English on a rather rudimentary level, TSWE has proven so effective that it has been made a permanent part of the program and is also available to colleges separately for their own use.

Isolating Verbal Abilities

In the fall of 1977, the College Board and ETS introduced a new kind of test battery for placement in freshman English courses—the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS).

The battery, which zeroes in on specific verbal abilities, consists of five multiple-choice tests: Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary, Sentence Structure, Logical Relationships, and Usage. Each test takes 30 minutes, except Vocabulary, which takes only 15. The tests may be used to diagnose a student's particular strengths and weaknesses so that he or she can be placed in courses at the proper level or so that an individual instructional program can be worked out. Students can also score the tests themselves to identify immediately those areas that need improvement.

The tests can be given as a battery, singly, or in any combination. Pilot tested in a number of public and private two- and four-year colleges in 1977-78, the new tests have several important and unusual features. In addition to a total score, each test (except Vocabulary) yields three or four descriptions (based on clusters of questions) of a student's command of particular aspects of language. The Reading Comprehension test, for example, has three descriptive clusters: understanding main ideas, understanding direct statements, and drawing inferences. The Logical Relationships test analyzes the student's ability to categorize ideas, use appropriate connectives, make analogies, and recognize principles of organization.

Under consideration for development are six other descriptive tests: finding information, typographic conventions, deriving meaning from context, word attack skills, recognizing meaning, and effectiveness of expression. Whether or not these tests will be developed depends on how well the first five are received and the amount of interest educators express in the additional ones.

Assessing Minimum Competence

The growing concern that many of the nation's high school graduates cannot read, write, or compute well enough to lead independent, productive lives has spawned the basic skills movement—an attempt by nearly every state department of education and thousands of local school districts

"Students can also score the tests themselves to identify immediately those areas that need improvement."

to ensure that graduates have the abilities they need to function effectively in adult life.

In response to the need for tests of minimum competence, ETS has created, with the aid of a consortium of over 300 school districts, the Basic Skills Assessment Program (see *FOCUS 4, LEARNING TO READ*). The program, introduced in the fall of 1977, consists of tests in reading, math, and writing. When given to students near the end of junior high or early in high school, the tests pinpoint students' weaknesses so they may be corrected before graduation.

The writing test has two 45-minute parts: a 75-question multiple-choice section called "A Writer's Skills" and an optional writing sample. The writing sample asks students to write a letter applying for a job, to fill out a simple form like an application for a driver's license, and to write a short imaginative or expository passage.

WRITING CENTER FORMED

As the national concern for writing ability has grown, so has the volume of inquiries and requests for assistance directed to ETS. Schools are asking for help in planning and evaluating writing programs and in organizing inservice training for teachers. Colleges are asking how to identify the large numbers of students who may need special writing instruction, how to diagnose a student's particular weaknesses, how to evaluate programs, how to revise writing courses and, most frequently, how to teach writing.

Associations, business firms, government agencies, and other organizations are coming to ETS for advice on assessing and improving the writing abilities of middle- and upper-echelon managers, who must be able to write readable reports. News organizations have even asked for help in estimating the writing abilities of prospective reporters.

To handle this increasing influx of inquiries, ETS established a new writing center, called "Programs for the Assessment of Writing," in the spring of 1978. Still in its formative stages, the center is responding to requests for assistance that fall outside the province of existing ETS testing programs. It will also coordinate ETS research into the teaching and evaluation of writing, keep in touch with writing programs across the nation, and lay plans for a national information center on the teaching and evaluation of writing and writing programs.

Only a few months old, the center is already involved in conducting workshops on holistic scoring, evaluating writing programs in several school districts, and advising the New Jersey Writing Project, an adaptation of the Bay Area Writing Project.

A FLURRY OF ACTIVITY

All the activity aimed at improving writing ability promises to have an effect. It won't happen quickly, however. Writing is a demanding endeavor and one cannot learn to do it well overnight. But the problem has been recognized and many things are being done about it.

Nearly every day brings news of the formation of new writing programs for teachers and students, the raising or reinstatement of writing requirements in colleges, and choruses of new voices deploring the state of writing.

A large part of the credit for that recognition must go to the news media, including television, which impressed onto the public consciousness what had been a perennial concern of a small group of writers and educators. As one college English teacher said, "Thank God for the publicity. It has made students willing to admit they cannot write very well and to seek help in learning how to do so."

Perhaps, Messrs. Thurber, White, and Barzun, there is hope yet.